

NEW ZEALAND

Helicopters are banned and mobile phones don't work. John Westbrooke enjoys the remote beauty of the South Island

New Zealand is a tectonic treat, a long, thin country created as the Indo-Australian and Pacific plates push each other upward. But who would have thought you can not only see where they collide, but feel it and smell it?

We visited Arthur's Pass, the highest road over the country's highest mountains, in the company of Dr Gerry McSweeney, botanist, eco-warrior and hotelier. A short way down the western side of the road, he took us to a cliff side where the rock strata were exposed.

"That's it there," and he pointed to one particularly dark seam of rock, the line where the plates meet. "And look at this." Squatting down, he pointed to a small spring of water. It smelt sulphurous, and it was noticeably warmer than the icy mountain streams running down the roadside, as if squeezed out by the friction of vast sections of the earth's crust rubbing together.

And that is more or less what it was. Some day, tourists may come to gawp at this evidence of the planet at work but for now, the road was deserted - just the crisp blue air, the peaks of the Southern Alps with their first dusting of winter snows, and us. If this is the Pacific King of Fire, it's a peaceful place.

Driving to Arthur's Pass from Christchurch, on the east coast of the South Island, or Greymouth on the west, is easy enough, along the routes pioneered during the gold rushes of the 1860s. But a better way to get there is on one of the world's great train journeys, the Trans-Alpine. It makes the coast-to-coast journey and back every day from Christchurch, at no great speed, in comfortable carriages with big scenic windows and an outdoor car crowded with photographers.

For a while it crosses the Canterbury Plains, where grain grows and sheep graze, before beginning its climb up the broad shingle valley of the braided Waimakariri River. The line runs along high bridges over wooded valleys, past bogs and tarns and tussock, close-cropped yellow-green hills and deep



High country: the Waimakariri River valley makes its way through New Zealand's Southern Alps at Arthur's Pass

John Westbrooke

The wonderful wizard of NZ

blue lakes, and up to the rainforest which begins near Arthur's Pass and covers much of the western slopes of the Southern Alps. (The mountains trap the eastern rain, making the coast notoriously wet.)

After that, you can windsurf past more rivers, and sheep to Greymouth, and after an hour's stopover return to Christchurch. But we broke our journey 3,000ft up at the McSweeneys' luxury Wilderness Lodge for the night.

You could sit in your room all day: not only does each one look out across the valley called *Tu Ko Awa a Amazonia* - "Valley of the mother of the rainbows" - but each has a dressing-table mirror carefully placed so you can see the highest

mountains from your bed.

But Gerry McSweeney's specialty is nature walks among New Zealand's unique plants and animals. He knows every plant around, from giant buttercups to native beeches, shy ferns to towering rimu trees, which would have been felled by loggers a century ago if they had been discovered in the dense bush.

He was a director of the Forest and Bird Protection Society for years, and his campaigns against logging and for conservation predictably made him enemies as well as friends (count me among the latter). In 1989, he and his wife decided to prove ecotourism could pay, by opening first a 20-room guest lodge down on the west coast, close to rainforest,

penguins and seals, and then the Arthur's Pass lodge.

Attached to it is a working sheep farm. "I was due to take some American guests on a walk one morning, but I also had to muster [round up] the sheep," says McSweeney. "So I asked them who'd like to come out at 5.30am and help catch sheep. Their hands all shot up."

"The highlight for them was when another bus full of tourists saw them, thought they were all local sheep farmers, and stopped to take their photos."

Still, it may be a pointer to the future of the economy of New Zealand - famously a country of 3.5m people and 45m sheep - that the tourist lodge is far more profitable than the farm.

As well as helping out with the shearing, guests can ski in the unsophisticated local fields, look for kiwi and kea - raucous, thieving mountain parrots -

work. You go there for the beauty and remoteness, not for adrenaline activities.

In the evening, enjoy good cooking and watch the stars through the house telescope: with no light pollution, there are more than most city dwellers would believe possible.

Not that city life in the south Island is very frantic. Greymouth is a small town with good craft shops, the west coast has deposits of greenstone (jade), another byproduct of geological activity, which Maoris have long valued and carved.

Christchurch is a bigger proposition, settled last century by the Church of England in imitation of an imaginary English market town. The grey stone cathedral, designed by George Gil-

bert Scott, still stands in the central square, although diminished by the ugly post-modern Noddyland architecture around it.

It is, however, enlivened by the luncheon performances of the Wizard - self-proclaimed living work of art, theorist of the fun revolution, role model for post-feminist man, and metaphysical engineer - who wears a black cape and pointed hat, pontificates wittily on modern life and offers up rain spells or blesses rugby players' underpants.

You can ride through the heart of town by tram, go punting on the Avon River, which winds its way through the city under willow trees, or stroll past carefully tended gardens surrounding suburban bungalows. A big

city in South Island terms, Christchurch is not far in spirit from the farming hamlets on the plains or the blissful isolation of the Arthur's Pass high country.

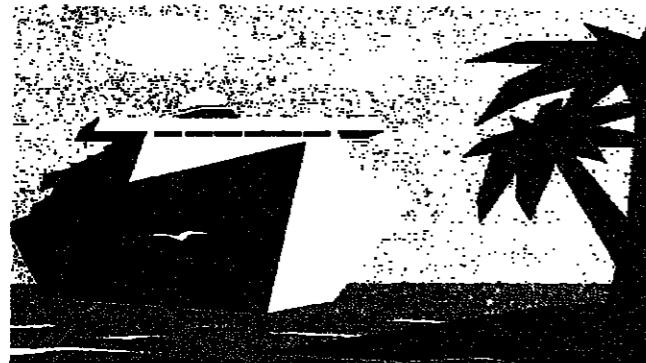
■ John Westbrooke was a guest of Air New Zealand (tel: 0181-741 2229), which flies from London to New Zealand six times a week from £650, and of the New Zealand Tourism Board (0899-300900 in the UK, 50p a minute; or www.nztb.govt.nz).

■ At the Wilderness Lodge (tel: +64 3 318 9246, night rates start at NZ\$195 (£50 - the New Zealand dollar is weak) and include breakfast, dinner and two walks).

■ TransAlpine trips cost NZ\$99 return and can be booked on +64 4 498 3308 outside the country. The Wizard is on www.wizard.gen.nz.

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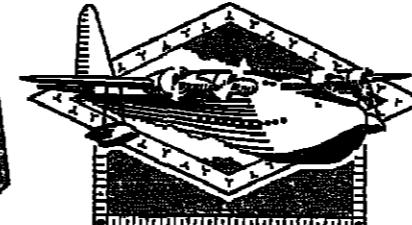
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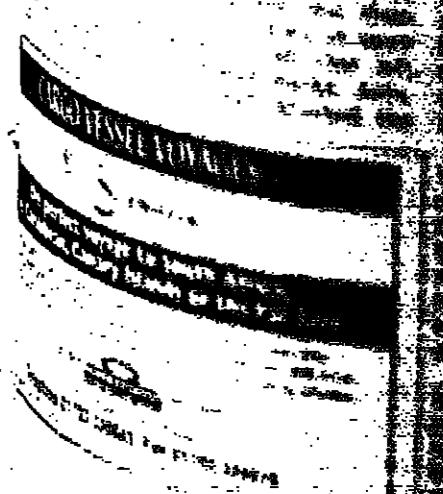
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SOUTH AMERICA

An utterly bewitching time in Bolivia

So just what are llama foetuses sold for? Guy Marks travelled to La Paz to find out

The first witch was sold. She sat on a beet corner tending her stall of curious wares. I wondered if she could be selling eyes of owl and toe of frog, but I don't dare find out. She had a look about her that wasn't welcoming. Piercing eye, stink in a worn-leather case, glared out from beneath the brow of her bowler hat, casting disdain on passers-by.

I could tell her message without it being spoken: "Point that amera at me and I'll turn you into a toad." I moved on down the street. It was narrow cobble alleys running along the steep hills in the city centre of La Paz.

Above it is the "smugglers market", with western consumer goods with dubious origins can be bought at bargain prices. Below it is the Plaza de San Francisco with its baroque church; an incongruous facade of ornate, sculpted stone-work.

Sandwiched between these two monuments to imported culture, the alleyway is a haven of the Bolivian heritage. It is full of bright colours, of art shops selling rich red oven textiles, shawls, laid-work and alpaca blankets. Musical instrument makers sit whitening at stirs of bamboo to make Andean pan pipes, and rob armallos of their armour to provide the bodies for Charango - the traditional stringed instrument.

In amongst these workshops is the odd drift trap selling mock-salpa jumpers and five-year-old antiques. In front of them are the stalls for which the street has become famous. The women who tend them are not artisandrants, but purveyors of ritual and ritualistic paraphernalia. They are the witches of La Paz. Although many a tourist

walks this street, the "witches' market" is not there as a tourist attraction. It is a genuine part of Bolivian culture, drawing on ancient Andean beliefs that are still respected today. People from all walks of life come to this market to buy the ingredients for offerings to the spirit world.

According to Felix, my guide, it was disrespectful for this culture by foreign visitors that had made some of the women so sulky. He took me farther down the street to talk to the second

The first ingredient was a layer of an aromatic herb called Koa, said to please the spirits

witch. Here we received a much warmer reception. With a smile, she held out a basket full of strange objects and, through Felix, explained what they were for. All the objects were to bring luck in one form or another and this collection, known as a *cha'la*, formed the basis of an all-purpose offering.

The basket was lined with white paper, while signifying a spell for good rather than a spell for evil. The first ingredient was a layer of an aromatic herb called Koa, said to please the spirits. Then the charms were added. These were a mixture of amulets made of clay or sugar with reliefs depicting scenes from everyday life.

Each represented the desires and aspirations of the person making the offering. A bag of money on a

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CARIBBEAN



Fast food in one of the most cosmopolitan societies on earth: The most basic of Trinidad's food traditions issues from Creole cooking

It's not such a wild world

They're trying times for travellers. Bombs (Colombia), kidnappers (Yemen), murders (the Bahamas): it used to be that these were internal matters, but now tourists can be actively targeted.

So where do you go to ensure a safe relaxing holiday? The answer, as always, is: just about anywhere, really. But to be doubly sure, ask the Foreign Office.

It offers frequently updated advice about security in more than 120 countries, by phone on 0171-238 4503, a BBC2 Ceefax on page 470 on and (much quicker) on the internet www.fco.gov.uk.

At present, it advises against any travel to 14 places, from Afghanistan to Western Sahara, and all but essential travel to 11 more (Pakistan and south-east Turkey among them). The FO has no power to ban flights from going anywhere, but travel insurers may use its warnings as an excuse not to recompense people whose trips have been cancelled.

Most FO advice, though, is of a less intimidating nature. India: aware of men, drive with care. Croatia: tick-borne encephalitis. France and Florida: watch out for hire cars with give-away number plates. Holland: don't take drugged drinks from strangers' tables at Phuket. Russia: take US dollars in pristine condition.

The US State Department's warnings - see travel.state.gov/travel/warnings.htm - are sometimes longer than the FO's, perhaps because Americans are seen as being greater risk. Individual

Americans often look like rich targets to for pickpockets; an rebels with ideological objections to capitalism, Christianity or Washington's role as Globalpol may sit at anything representing Uncle Sam, from embassies to Plaza Hollywood.

Some countries clearly require more than usual care. This may appear include Islamic countries where westerners might be resented, though the State Department and FO are calm about Kenya and Tanzania, scenes of the recent US embassy bombings, merely advising caution.

And among popular destinations that still require care about your possessions: South Africa and Brazil, where the FO notes high crime rates.

What can you do to reduce risks? Much as you'd do at home: dress down; leave jewelry behind. Stay away from poor parts of town.

Be streetwise about popular scams: the stranger who pulls out mud on your jacket and picks your pocket while you look, the "policeman" who asks to inspect your documents, the passing driver who tells you that you have a flat tire.

With countries such as Jamaica, Fiji, Spain, Turkey, the FO is pains to stress that "most" people have enjoyable, trouble-free holidays, before pointing to minor problems, mostly the bag-snatching variety. That's about right for every holidaymaker in trouble you read about, a million having nothing worse than a sunburn or a queasy stomach from the pell-mell.

John Westbook

Try everything except cow-heel soup

Nicholas Woodsworth went to Port of Spain in search of genuine Trinidadian food. His tastebuds are still recovering

I am never happier, food from Europe, India, China and the Middle East. I was not disappointed with the *hoi sin* chicken and stir-fried noodles I settled on at the Happy Palace counter. But I was disappointed with myself.

This was not the way to eat. This was not Trinidadian food - this was a tail-between-the-legs retreat to the international food distastened by all *bona fide* food adventurers.

Was I losing my taste for the genuine, I wondered? In my time I had braved almost without blanching, snake meat in Guangzhou and sea slug in the Sulu Sea. This would not do. I slunk out of the Excellent City Centre set on eating locally - not a morsel of off-island food, I determined, would pass my lips.

The days passed, and I continued to eat European, Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern meals. For, it turned out, I could not have been more wrong - all the foods in the mall were local and genuinely Trinidadian. Brought to the island over centuries by its many far-flung cultures, they are

now enjoyed by everyone here. One has only to look at the faces on a Port of Spain street to see that this is one of the most cosmopolitan societies on earth.

It is on the street, in fact, that some of the most authentic and popular foods of Trinidad are enjoyed. Port-of-Spaniers are con-

I sampled large blue crabs beside cornflour and cassava dumplings in boiling coconut milk

stantly rushing about, and on busy weekdays rarely have time for relaxed meals. But their exuberance for life is reflected in their love of food and cooking, and all over the city sidewalks are crowded with snack shops, bars, food stands, markets and impromptu restaurants,

Not all of them serve cow-bean soup.

My own initial favourites were the *roti* stands. In India *roti* refers simply to round, flat, *chapati* bread. In Trinidad the bread - two layers of dough stuffed with ground split peas - is just the beginning. Into it goes curried meats, shrimp or vegetables, and then a layer of spiced chick peas or potatoes. The whole is then folded, making a complete portable meal. It is the most popular food of all, as entire rows of frantically busy city *roti* stands attest.

From *rotis* I graduated to other island specialties. In the Home Style Restaurant, I sampled curried crabs and dumplings - large blue crabs simmered beside cornflour and cassava dumplings in boiling coconut milk.

At the Tai Hing restaurant I tasted shrimp chow mein, sweet and "browned down" with caramelised sugar in the island style. On Independence Square I tried Lebanese potato salad and kebabs. There, too, I ate *arepas*, matte patties stuffed with chicken, a legacy of Trinidad's 300 years of Spanish colonisation.

I ventured into even more exotic territory. On a St James sidewalk late one boozy night, along with dozens of other revellers, I sipped corn soup, thick with kernels and loaded with pepper sauce - the perfect anti-

deite, it is said, to too much rum.

On Maracas beach I bit into "bake and shark", deep-fried bread stuffed with shark steaks and flavoured with a variety of spicy chutney sauces - papaya, lime, cilantro and fiery yellow pepper.

Even refreshments as simple as the chilled green coconuts sold from trucks around Port of Spain's vast, grassy park, the Savannah, were delicious - first, one drinks the clear, cooling liquid, then, with a spoon fashioned in seconds from the husk by a vendor's flashing machete, one quickly scoops out the soft, sweet, translucent jelly inside.

Now, this was all well and good, but as I ate my way through different cultures, I realised I was avoiding the central issue. The most basic of Trinidad's food traditions issue from Creole cooking - the foods evolved by black Africans making the most of their own traditions, back-yard ingredients, and the often less-than-prime provisions doled out by their French slave-masters.

This is the island's most serious eating - cow-skin souce, pig-tail and cow-heel all spring from it - and when I arrived in the tiny coastal Afro-Caribbean village of Blanchisseuse I resolved to tackle it head on.

Luckily, in the person of plump, genial Sita Joyeau, I

found the ideal Creole food interpreter. Taught by her grandmother, she found herself as a young girl helping cook holiday and Sunday feasts for a vast extended family.

Sita has been cooking ever since. Sita is also consulted by Blanchisseuse villagers in the arcane and much-

Cocoos turned out to be nothing more alarming than a blend of cornmeal flour and okra, bound, as so much Creole food is, with coconut milk. Pelad is a tasty blend of cinnamon-spiced rice and peas. Buljol, a dried-fish dish, is particularly popular in a coastal community like Blanchisseuse.

Fish here is often smoked over coconut husks and bay leaves, then sun-dried. Later soaked, it is tossed in hot coconut oil with tomatoes, hot peppers and onions. All stand comparison with what I regard as Sita's *che d'oeuvre*, green banana salad served beside duck curried with cilantro, garlic, ginger and massala.

And so to cow-heel soup. Sita made it. I tried it, and to be honest - in spite of the covering flavours of split peas, pumpkin, carrots, yam, taro and onions - I cannot say I found the gluey and gelatinous hunk of boiled cow hoof terribly appealing.

revered art of medicinal herb and plant cures. She took me into the kitchen and, in chopping, slicing, mixing and simmering, showed me a cuisine that was hardly as frightening as they sound.

Callaloo, cocco, pelau, buljol - such foods are highly popular on the island and all, I discovered, taste fine.

Callaloo, virtually a national dish, is a puree mixture of okra and taro - two plants brought from Africa and essential in the slave diet.

Flavoured with salted pork or crab, it is poured over rice.

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Flavoured with salted pork or crab, it is poured over rice.

But there is a reason for everything, including the popularity of cow-heel soup. "Our men consume anything they think will improve their virility," she laugh. "They devour the sea urchins off the rocks. They strip so much bark off the hababoo tree [from the French *bois bardé* - swollen wood] that it drops over and dies. But there is nothing to beat cow-heel soup - it has something to do with all that glue. Men cannot get enough of it."

I cast my mind back to other outlandish meals I had eaten. It seemed to me I remembered vague, similarly extravagant claims for snake meat and sea slugs.

Mentally I filed cow-heel soup away in the same category of peculiar foods, and carried on enjoying Trinidadian cooking. Odd local dishes do indeed sometimes reveal the diner's true appetites.

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John Westbook

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You might have to travel a great distance to find quintessential Englishness in an hotel these days, and even then the chances are you will be disappointed. The Windamere Hotel is, indeed, a very long way away - in Darjeeling, 7,000ft up in the foothills of the Himalayas. But it is far from disappointing, seeming to exist in a world depicted in English films of the 1940s.

To get there you must first fly from Delhi or Calcutta to Bagdogra in northern Bengal. Then you have a choice: either hire a car for the perilously steep three-hour drive up the mountains, or take the train.

The narrow-gauge "toy train", as they call it, takes at least twice as long. Railway enthusiasts, however, appreciate being tugged along by steam locomotives built in Manchester and Glasgow more than a century ago. The tracks parallel the narrow main road as it ascends from the plains of Siliguri to the heights of Darjeeling, offering

unforgettable glimpses of the tea gardens which cling to the sheer hillsides.

Whichever method you choose, you will arrive in Darjeeling shaken and stirred. If you stay at the Windamere, the next few minutes will pass like a dream. You hand over your passport, sign the register and are ushered into afternoon tea: their own variety of Darjeeling (believed to come from Tumsong estate), wafer-thin tomato sandwiches and cakes.

Meanwhile, your room is being prepared. At 5.30 a coal fire is lit in the grate and a hot-water bot-

tis popped into your bed to protect you from the cold Himalayan nights. Most, if not all, of the rooms seem to be large and old-fashioned. Faded photographs and oil paintings adorn the walls; and there are dressing rooms and bath-tubs with claw feet which seem to cry out for a gently fortifying dram of whisky before you face the evening's entertainment downstairs.

The Windamere's owners are conscious of the need to offer their guests some entertainment. Nepali dancers perform inside when it is cold, or sometimes in the walled garden in the summer.

A nip in the air brings forth hot brandy punch and pies.

Peak after peak towers over the hotel, culminating at the end of the valley in Kangchenjunga, at 28,145ft second only to Everest.

Basking in the sun on the terrace during the day you are likely to encounter "Madam" Tendulkar, the hotel's 33-year-old owner, who still ambles amiably around with the air of a stick.

After dark the terrace is lined with braziers filled with hot coals to ward off the chill mountain air.

The hotel revolves around the dining room and the bar. All meals (even tea) are included in the room rate, and meal-times are observed with a strictness reminiscent of a seaside boarding house. Breakfast is copious fruit, porridge, bacon and eggs with chicken sausages, American muffins, toast, marmalade.

Having work to do in the tea-gardens, I failed to experience lunch, but the candlelit dinner was something special. To some extent this was attributable to the pianist, who nightly ran through her repertoire of Noel Coward songs, regaling package-trekkers, nostalgic former planters, schoolmasters and writers

with "A room with a view" or "Somewhere I'll find you".

The daily printed menu is literally Anglo-Indian. First soup, then a confusing choice which, it transpires, is no choice at all. An English dish is presented alongside one from Nepal or Tibet. The English dish might be the delicious local pork that comes from the little, black hairy pigs which scuttle around the nearby villages. Usually, then, you are obliged to eat the local dish, too, before tackling some sticky Anglo-Indian pudding.

Late nights are rare at the Windamere, but if you are lucky you may catch the bar before it closes. Over a Black Dog whisky and soda you will find that the other guests loosen up and talk in scenes reminiscent of old films, about attempts to scale a local peak, or how much they paid for a shawl in the bazaar.

Of course, this sort of hotel doesn't appeal to everybody. The walls are thin in places and one morning I was woken stiffly by some Americans next door complaining of cold and lamenting the absence of air-conditioning.

On the terrace I listened to a party from the US who were comparing notes on their rooms. They found the absence of television burdensome. Maybe to enjoy the Windamere's peculiar pleasures you have to be English, or have a special feeling for the past.

■ The Windamere Hotel, Darjeeling, tel +91-354 54041, fax 54043. Double rooms from \$80 (£50) full board. Payments must be made 30 days in advance. Giles MacDonogh's stay was arranged by Greaves Travel (0171-486 6646).

Madras – with marriage in the air

Nick Haslam finds that his character is under the spotlight

The astrologer looked at me thoughtfully and then turned over a page or two. "You are," he said, "principled, usually cool-tempered, but prone to the occasional blasting and testiness." I nodded in a cool, measured fashion.

"And your future wife will be of medium height, round faced, slow talking and prone to problems of the uterus." He must have seen the flush of testiness in my features for he quickly went on. "But a remedial pilgrimage can change all that."

Marriage seemed to be in the air in Madras for, barely had I arrived, when my guide, an engaging woman called Renuka, had invited me to her cousin's wedding. We had just finished a whirlwind tour of the city, starting with St Mary's, the oldest Anglican church east of Suez. It was built in the 1880s by the British East India Company.

Completing with steeple and shady graveyard, only the hibiscus and pepper trees were a reminder that we were in fact in Tamil Nadu, and not some sleepy Sussex village.

The massive fort of St George nearby though, said more about the real secular purpose of the Company when Madras, formerly three sleepy fishing villages on the Bay of Bengal, became its first base on the sub-conti-



The Enfield motorcycle factory on the outskirts of Madras. As an enthusiast entering, it was a little like passing through the gates of paradise

Nick Haslam

less forgotten over the following days, for early next morning we set off for Kanchipuram, one of the seven holy cities for Hindus and a two-hour drive west of Madras. As we approached through paddy fields the high temple towers or gopurams loomed over wide stone tanks where women were washing clothes.

Later, over a feast of vegetarian food served on banana leaves, the newlyweds asked me if I was married. Polite concern was voiced at my single state and a visit to the couple, who had been shielded from each other by a large sheet, were united by a ceremonial string.

Beggars and holy men sat in the shade, and I was glad that Renuka had reminded me to have plenty of change to pass out to the numerous hands stretched in our direction.

My favourite temple was

the massive Sri Ekambaram-athar, with 540 columns in its dark courtyard, built around the sacred 2,500-year-old mango tree where, according to legend, Parvati, wife of the great god Shiva, had done penance for many years.

Unwisely, she had playfully held her hands over the Lord's eyes, plunging the world into darkness and forcing him to open his third eye to restore the universe. Only after she had completed lifetimes of obsequies did Shiva relent, a punishment which even Renuka, a devout Hindu, thought was a little over the top.

I stayed that night at the Ashok hotel at nearby Mahabalipuram on the beach, and was up early next morning, as the fishermen put out to sea, to head back to Madras.

At Film City, a vast collection of sets and studios in the suburbs, where more films are produced than in Bombay, I met Mr Balasubramanian, the technical manager, whose office occasionally filled with the rapid beat of hooves and truncated

screams from the cutting rooms below.

"We make family films," he said. "Much singing, hard cuts, romance and never less than three hours long."

"Are there any films, perhaps, without singing?" I asked tentatively. "Oh no -

on the outskirts of Madras. I have to declare an interest here: having ridden an ancient British motorcycle for years, entering that factory, where gleaming new Enfields stood in rows, was a little like passing through the gates of paradise.

The last Royal Enfield made in the UK came off the production line in the 1960s, but here virtually the same distinctive design is still being produced. Under signs proclaiming "Enfield, all man's first bike should be", I wandered through the factory with general manager Mr Shankar, as the new shift trickled into work.

"They are always slow to start," he said, laughing. "You see, we have the most highly unionised labour force in the whole of India. What can we do?"

Inhaling deeply that heavy perfume of paint and fuel which is peculiar to motor-cycles the world over, we came to the test bed, where new machines were started up for the first time.

"Would you like to try one?" said Mr Shankar. Within minutes, I was pottering slowly around the factory enclosure with an ecstatic grin, riding one of the latest Enfield products, a diesel-engined 225cc single. On the gate prevented me from hitting the open road and then and there, but I knew, too, that the appointment with the astrologer was looming.

Gratefully I shook Mr Shankar's hand and, like any zealot, wished him well in keeping the Enfield on the road. "Oh we have no worries there," he said. "The bike is now becoming a macho symbol for young Indian men - and there are many of those."

The astrologer, an unkempt man in his 30s, having delivered his analysis of my character (pretty accurate it was too, I thought) consulted his books for the last time.

"The nuptials should take

place after next May, when Jupiter passes out of the 12th house - but you are an elephant, and must not marry a lion," he said.

Forewarned, and making a mental note to stay away from cats of all kinds, I walked back into the sunshine of the real world.

■ Nick Haslam flew to India with Air India (tel: 0171-353 7350). A return flight London-Madras is £403 but many travel agents offer discounted fares. The itinerary was organised by the Government of India Department of Tourism, 7 Cork Street, London. Tel: 0171-437 3677.

Monkey

Giles MacDonough with

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الراحل

The elephant god kept an eye on us

Nick Haslam combines sightseeing in Mysore, in southern India's biggest state of Karnataka, with a fishing expedition

At 5.30am, the Shatabdi Express drew slowly out of Madras station bound for Mysore and I settled back into my seat to catch up on some sleep. Minutes later a tap on the shoulder awoke me, and from then on the two smartly dressed attendants brought a seemingly never-ending succession of tasty titbits, including a full breakfast of rice, vegetables and dahl.

At Mysore, five hours later, Pradeep, my guide, was at first concerned and then amused when I groaned as he told me that lunch awaited at the hotel.

After the crowded bustle of Madras, Mysore, in southern India's biggest state of Karnataka, seemed to run in slow motion. People, rickshaws, cows and cars wandered at a languid pace through its wide streets against a backdrop of what seemed like palaces, but most of which turned out to be municipal offices.

Only in the market, heaped high with fruit and vegetables, did there seem to be any sense of urgency. Porters hurried past laden with sacks, shouting warnings to clear their way through narrow alleyways where the air was pungent with the smell of spices.

The car drew up at the Lalitha Palace, a magnificent pile of cupolas and colonnades, blindingly white and once belonging to a maharajah. Uniformed doormen seized my bags and led me down long, echoing corridors beneath portraits of massively mustachioed maharajahs to my suite of two vast rooms overlooking the swimming pool.

Lunch was out of the question. So we sped away to Chamundi hill, where the air was a few degrees cooler. Mysore was spread below us, its myriad palaces shimmering in the soft light of late afternoon.

That evening we joined a crowd of sightseers outside the grandest of them all. The Mysore Palace, home of the incumbent maharajah, cost Rs4.2m when it was built in 1912. "Enough," as Pradeep pointed out, "to buy a plot of land and small house in Delhi now - and a broom cupboard in Bombay."

In the gathering dusk its bulk seemed to extend upward forever. Then, to a gasp from the crowd, the palace burst into brilliance as thousands of light bulbs picked out its extraordinarily ornate outline against the darkening sky. There was no glow from the windows of the east wing, however. His Highness, as the maharajah is known locally, was away in Delhi on political business.

Heading towards the misty silhouette of the Western Ghats early next morning, we drove through fields of



A roadside scene in Karnataka: Heading towards the misty silhouette of the Western Ghats, we drove through fields of sugar cane and rice. It was harvest time, and the country roads were full of ambling bullock carts

Nick Haslam

sugar cane and rice. It was harvest time, and the country roads were full of ambling bullock carts.

In pride of place on the dashboard of our car was a resplendent transparent figure of Ganesha, the elephant god, whose eyes winked every time the indicators were used. I had thought he was the God of Learning but the driver Venkata explained:

"He clears obstacles for mind and body, and so is good for drivers also."

Under this benign protection we drove on, and at midday wound down a steep hillside to a tented camp by the tranquil banks of the Cauvery, one of south India's longest rivers. At the bamboo-roofed bar, four Indians were staring morosely into their drinks.

"Dropped a spoon in front of the big black mural and the chap didn't take it," one

said sadly. Pradeep muttered that the mural was a fish, and all became suddenly clear. It had obviously not been a good morning at the Cauvery Fishing Camp.

We put our bags in one of the comfortable tents, and then in the company of a ghillie called Sidda, set off upstream in a buffalo skin coracle. A flash of blue signalled a kingfisher heading downstream, and every now and then the mirror surface of the river would heave with the sudden turmoil of a big fish. In the murky depths lurked the mahseer, which could grow up to 100lb, so it was with eager anticipation that we baited up and cast for the first time.

Almost immediately Sidda had a bite, and landed a 5lb mahseer, which he returned to the river. A minute or so later I felt that brief electric quiver on my line, and

struck hard. Was it, I wondered, as the line grew taut, a veteran mahseer, which gives pound for pound a better fight than any other fish in the world, apart from the giant catfish of the Amazon?

Muscles tightening, I reeled in, to land within seconds a tiny catfish, which somehow I had hooked through the tail. Sidda roared with laughter and asked if all Englishmen caught their fish backwards.

Unruffled, I disengaged the fish and threw it back. But our luck was out that evening. Apart from a few more catfish, nothing else struck.

As night fell and cormorants came to roost in the tamariand tree opposite the camp we paddled back to base, and settled into bamboo easy chairs.

Gusti had lost his camera and portable phone but kept his sense of priorities. Clinging on to the rod,

he swam ashore to fight on for another half an hour before the cunning fish wrapped the line around a sharp rock and broke for freedom.

Next morning, well bitten by the fishing bug myself, I was up early and, with Sidda, tried some other pools. But only small catfish

took the bait, and the big ones stayed away. We left at 10.30 bound for Bangalore and 100 miles west.

■ Nick Haslam flew to Madras with Air India. His itinerary was organised by the Government of India Department of Tourism. (See opposite page for phone details.)

Monkey business

Giles MacDonogh with some dos and don'ts in India

A friend told me a story about her last trip to India. She had been staying in a genteel hotel in the mountains. She returned to her room after a walk to find the bed occupied by a monkey.

"A small monkey?" I said, thinking of the beasts I had seen in the streets of Simla.

"It was the size of a cocker spaniel," she replied indignantly. "I advanced on it, hoping I'd frighten it away, but it began to bare its teeth, and ran at me."

The friend fled to reception imagining the monkey committing unspeakable acts in her absence. She found little sympathy with the hotel staff: "What? You left the window open? You must never do that in India!"

There are many things you don't do in India, the chief worry is riding roughshod over Asian sensibilities, and it is not always clear what they are. When in doubt, don't. Hands, especially what to do with women's hands, are a nightmare. The answer is *namaste* - a prayer-like gesture, a smile and a slight inclination of the head.

The Indians blame the British for the red tape necessary to get anything done. "You taught us to do it that way," they say. Banks consume time. If you don't have time to spare, change your money at the hotel.

Baksheesh or modest bribery, is generally uncalled for. An Indian friend tells me the best thing to do when

you are in only moderate trouble is to put on the *bura sakhia*: "Authoritatively works."

Tipping is a plague. A wad of Rs10 notes kept in a separate pocket is a good idea. It is generally enough, if they protest, give them Rs20.

Crowds are an unavoidable problem in India and you need to keep your wits about you outside airports and railway stations.

Freelance porters tend to grab at your luggage. I have never taken a bus. From the outside they are a wonder to behold: stuffed full with human cargo. In rural regions, I have seen as many as 14 clinging to a Land Rover.

Trains always somehow contrive to be dirty, even in the super-swish "AC 1st class". In theory, this contains four berths, but you are very lucky if the conductors don't add more.

A conductor once tried to billet a general on our already over-filled carriage. I asked the man whether generals enjoyed the right to requisition seats on Indian trains. It appeared that they did not and he went elsewhere.

Taxi fares are worse than arbitrary and if questioned drivers pretend they do not understand English. Calcutta cabbies must take the prize for being the filthiest in the world.

Rural taxis, on the other hand, can be fine, and are often a relatively inexpensive alternative to a long

train journey; you have to be a committed railway buff to want to take the train to Simla or Darjeeling. Hiring an Ambassador with a driver is the best means of getting about, as the driver also feels it part of his brief to ward off beggars and other undesirables.

Drinkable water is far easier to come by than it was. You may now buy mineral water on railway stations, but there are times when you should exercise

caution. Recently, in what looked like malarial paddy fields in Bengal, I was offered the choice between water and a soft drink and I drank my first glass of cold beer in nearly 25 years.

I generally travel with a bottle of whisky, as alcohol is not always available when you want an evening peg. Whisky and soda "without ice" is a dependable drink. Indian beer is sweet and gassy. Tea is generally very sweet and milky.

I am less prudent about

food than I was, but as a rule I do not eat salads or cut fruit. The test of a real India hand is said to be his ability to eat "brains masala" from a street-side stall. I haven't made it yet. If you don't enjoy haggling, and want to buy presents, go to government-run Cottage Industry shops, where the prices are reasonable - and fixed.

I take every precaution against mosquitoes I can. I enjoy the security of a net, or the sight of a benign lizard on my ceiling, in the knowledge that it is on my

head. I have had few encounters with larger pests. I had a driver who was apt to point out cobras from the car window, but I have only come up close once, and I was convinced the reptile had bad teeth removed.

You should not bait tigers or stand behind elephants, but problems can occur naturally. Another Indian friend was charged by a rhino in Assam as a child. His guide threw a stone, hitting the animal on his horn. It threw the animal off balance and it ran away. As the friend put it: "That man should have played cricket for India."

I have never had problems with dacoits, thugs or pickpockets either. Only when it came to visiting a temple earlier this year, was I advised to hide my valuables and leave my camera in the car: the monkeys pinched everything, I was told, and it could be the devil getting them to give it back.

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Travel Brochure Guide

The next Travel Brochure Guide will be published on 14 November 1998. For more information please contact Helen Jeyses Tel: +44 171 873 4038

FT TRAVEL

All you ever wanted to do on hols

John Westbrooke and Jill James
go globetrotting in search of
the latest vacation offers

The Asian financial crisis means bargains for travellers. A seven-night package linking Kuala Lumpur's Ritz-Carlton and the luxury Pangkor Laut resort starts at only £450 (flights extra); call +44 01626 771171.

Premier (+44 01223 516677) can give you a week in Bangkok from £449.

TravelMood offers 10 nights in Malaysia, with flights to Penang, from £299; details from +44 0171-253 0280. Asien Explorer (01491-823417) claims the cost of a 12-night trip to Bell, from £585, is a 10-year low. Flying business class (with Gulf Air) from London to Bangkok, Jakarta or Manila costs just £979 until the end of November with Bridge the World (+44 0171-734 7440). Even in New Zealand, where the tourism industry is suffering from the disappearance of visitors from south-east Asia, Travel 2 (+44 0841-530066) has cut 20 per cent from self-drive holidays.

GRAND TOUR: Go around the world with 80 people as Orient-Express inauguates its Great South Pacific Express down eastern Australia. A

10-country itinerary will include a private tour of Kensington Palace, masked Ball in Venice, Bedouin desert party and a Rajasthan banquet, and much more, with trips on three Orient-Express trains and Concorde. It leaves London next April and costs £38,000 – including everything. Itinerary from +44 0171-805 5080.

TRUNK ROAD: Amble through northern Thailand on elephant back for six days, as part of a luxury 13-day holiday with One + One Travel (+44 01935-812000). You get your own trekking crew and spend the nights camping or with hill tribe villages. Your seat on the elephant is well padded, the brochure advises.

LAKELAND: A third of Malawi is water – 300-mile-long Lake Malawi, with golden beaches, islands and some hotels around its shores. Sunvil (+44 0181-232 9777) will get you to this little-known African country, as an add-on to a safari or for a longer stay.

MAKE TRACKS: The Trans-Siberian train across Russia is 100 years old this year. Bridge the World offers



'Passage East' is a book filled with such delightful drawings and photographs, celebrating the golden age of the steamship, that one is almost tempted to cut them out and pin them on the wall. There are 52 paintings from maritime artist Ian Marshall supported by period pictures, maps and commentary by historian John Maxtone-Graham. Out in hardback, the book is published by Spellmount/Howell Press at £30.95 (150 pages).

The painting above shows RMS Arcadia in Grand Harbour, Malta, in 1858, when the island was already a long-standing port of call on P&O's route from Great Britain to the east.

boat race on the Mekong River in Vientiane is a lively affair: after a night of spirit worship, men spend two days racing longboats, while women sing rude songs and question their sexual prowess. Watch it with Symphonies (+44 0171-294 5906), a 16-day trip leaving Bangkok on September 23, costs £385 plus flights.

HIGH SOCIETY: See a tschu in Bhutan – that's a festival, in the remote and rarely visited Himalayan Kingdom – with Steppes East (+44 01285-810287); the £2,950 trip, leaving London on September 26, visits India too.

SWING LAO: The annual boat race on the Mekong River in Vientiane is a lively affair: after a night of spirit worship, men spend two days racing longboats, while women sing rude songs and question their sexual prowess. Watch it with Symphonies (+44 0171-294 5906), a 16-day trip leaving Bangkok on September 23, costs £385 plus flights.

LAND, SEA AND AIR: Go on a safari with a difference – a 10-day wildlife tour of Mexico with Orient-Castle Travel (+44 0171-229 1411); you'll see millions of monarch butterflies waiting to fly to Canada; turtles hatching; whales migrating. You stay in big luxury or small, elegant hotels. Best months: November to February; price from £2,880.

INDIAN SUMMER: Ah, the things to do on the subcontinent. Eat your way round India with Cox & Kings (+44 0171-873 5000) on a tailor-made tour taking in cooking demonstrations and tasting of north and south India cuisine. Or unwind at Rayillas, a Jaipur hotel with India's first luxury spa, combining western aromatherapy and Indian ayurvedic health principles for "Aromaveda" treatments. Greaves Travel (+44 0171-487 9111). Or go to the famous Pushkar camel fair in November 1-4 – with camel racing, traditional dancing and 50,000 camels for sale. Explore's 22-day tour costs £1,360; call +44 01262-344161. Or try a touch of the Raj at Darjeeling hill station on a tour with imaginative Traveller (+44 0191-742 8612), with side-trip to Sikkim.

ARIA PRESUMPTIVE: See Africa the old way, on private flights during the day and first-class hotels at night. Air Voyages of Distinction has adapted a Boeing 757 to seat 106 passengers (instead of 237) and two departures next year will explore spots such as Mauritius, the Skeleton Coast, Mt Kilimanjaro and the Victoria Falls. Details from +44 0181-464 4488.

TURKEY TROT: See the Turkey nobody knows – the lush north-east (and neighbouring Georgia) – with Ponics Tours. Group tours or tailor-made visits go for the Byzantine monasteries, Ottoman mosques, the plant life, the horseback riding in the Caucasus, the mountain scenery... or just the grif. In the works: a guided tour to the Towers of Trebizond (it's now called Trabzon) in the footsteps of writer Rose Macaulay. Details and inspiration from +44 0122-550442.

SALES DRIVE: Stay a night in Seattle's Hotel Monaco for just £55,000. The price includes a free key chain and a 1998 Mazda Miata convertible, gift-wrapped for a grand presentation. Details from +44 0122-1770.

LOOP OF SILK: Adventurous types can travel the Silk Road by train with imaginative Traveller (+44 01285-810287) and visit the walled city of Sana'a, the medieval capital of Taiz, the desert town of Shifan, and Marib, the Queen of Sheba's capital (probably). The escorted tour leaves on October 11 and costs from £1,930.

VIN DU SUD: Some of the world's southernmost vineyards are in New Zealand. Visit names like Cloudy Bay and Te Mata on a two-week February tour with Arblaster & Clarke Wine Tours (+44 01730-893344), in the company of Margaret Harvey MW. It costs £2,688.

RIDE 'EM COWBOYS: The Calgary Stampede takes place next July 9-18: cowboys riding wild horses bareback, chuckwagons racing, musical variety shows, and all in sight of the Rockies. Kuoni guests can buy a \$99 Stampede package when they stay at the Delta Bow Valley Inn downtown; seven nights including flights from £1,049. Tel: +44 01306-742888.

GAME DRIVE: Take a self-drive safari in Tanzania with Safari Drive (01488-681611); for £1,880 and up you get a Land Rover, and suggested 15-day itineraries including stays in the Ngorongoro Crater and the Serengeti in lodges and tented camps. You also stay on Mafia Island (but hopefully won't have to sleep with the fishes).

OVERS DOWN UNDER: Visit Australia and you can see not only the opera house and hats with bits of cork hanging from them, but the last two Ashes cricket tests, if you take an Australian package. Leave December 23, watch England triumph, and come back on January 6, all for £1,337. Call 0171-734 7755.

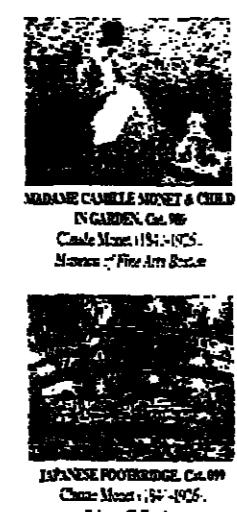
AFFORDABLE: Take a two-day tour of the fjords of... Oman, by bhow and 4WD; bordering the Strait of Hormuz are 600km of cliffs, lakes, coral reefs and deserted beaches, open to the public only since 1994, says Arabian Odyssey (+44 01242-224482). Excursion costs from £548.

SYDNEY Opera House is 25 in October; call Aussie Helpline (0891-070707) for a list of the many celebrations.

AFRICAN Experience cuts up to 15 per cent off holiday prices to South Africa as the rand tumbles. Call 0890-168 246.

ED'S Museum of the Absurd – all sorts of art, craft, antique and jumque – is open weekends in Toronto; call +1 416 977 3835.

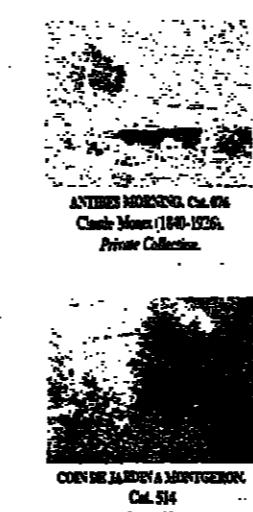
THEY LOOK LIKE ORIGINAL MONETS



MARIE CAMILLE MONET & CHILD
IN GARDEN, C.1872.
Claude Monet (1840-1926).
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



THE HAY STACK, Claude Monet (1890-1924). Part of the United Editions Monet Collection.



ANTOINE MONET IN HIS GARDEN
C.1873.
Claude Monet (1840-1926).
Private Collection.

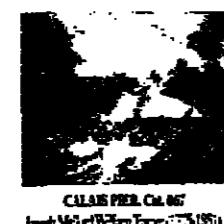
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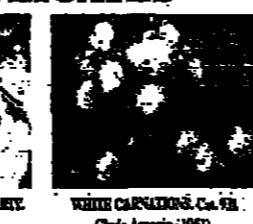


POPPY FIELD,
C.1873.
Claude Monet (1840-1926).
South Kensington Museum, S. Kennington,
Part of the London Editions Collection.



THE BOATING PARTY, C.1874.
Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919).
National Gallery, London.

Private Collection.



UNDER THE TREES,
C.1872.
Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919).
Private Collection.

Private Collection.

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TAILPIECE

This weekend marks Heritage Open Days in most of Britain, when a variety of properties of historical and architectural interest, not normally accessible, are opened free to the public.

Belle Tout Lighthouse at Beachy Head, for instance, the country's only residential lighthouse, opens its doors to the public for the first time this century. You can see the second world war headquarters of Flight Command at RAF Bentley Priory, Stanmore, the new Ruskin Library at the University of Lancaster, the private Ink Pen Post Box Museum in Taurton and a host of others. Details on 0891-800603 (50p a minute) or on the Internet

at www.civichtrust.org.uk.

Other regions' open days are handled separately for Scotland, where openings are staggered over weekends throughout the month, call 0141-221 1466; Northern Ireland, 01232-543078; Wales, 01222-484666.

The most concentrated collection of properties is in London, and will be open next weekend. Among new show homes: Lloyd's building, designed by Richard Rogers Partnership, and Alfred Waterhouse's Prudential Insurance headquarters. The event has proved highly popular: up from 200,000 visitors in 1994 to 500,000 last year – and if you want to see St Pancras

Station Hotel or the Foreign Office, expect to queue for hours. But there are always underreviewed hidden gems: Art Deco cinemas, architects' houses, medieval barns, civic buildings and many more.

Details from 0891-600 061 (from 30p a minute) or <http://www.londonopenhouse.com>.

The Heritage Open Days are promoted in part by the Council of Europe, and involve 44 countries: Russia and San Marino have been on display, but others open on various weekends this month (Germany tomorrow, France and Italy next weekend) through to Bosnia on October 9. Information from Brussels: +32 2549 0277.

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